DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 233 980 SP 022 522

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TITLE Achilles Pain.
PUB DATE 5 May 83
NOTE 3p.
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Athletics; *Etiology; Guidelines; *Injuries; Jogging; *Prevention; *Running
IDENTIFIERS PF Project; Sports Medicine

ABSTRACT

Five ailments which can cause pain in the achilles tendon area are: (1) muscular strain, involving the stretching or tearing of muscle or tendon fibers; (2) a contusion, inflammation or infection called tenosynovitis; (3) tendonitis, the inflammation of the tendon; (4) calcaneal bursitis, the inflammation of the bursa between the achilles tendon and the calcaneus (heel bone); and (5) an avulsion fracture which occurs when the tendon pulls away from its attachment carrying with it a small piece of bone. Treatment of these problems ranges from simple rest to surgery; however, the best treatment is the prevention of the injury. Preventive steps which can be taken include proper warmup, a good flexibility program, a high level of conditioning, proper running shoes, and slow progression when increasing speed or distance. Advice of a physician should be sought early in order to ensure proper diagnosis and treatment. (DC)

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ED233980

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ACHILLES PAIN

May 5, 1983

QUESTION: I am a 36 year old runner. I average 30-35 miles per week and thoroughly enjoy competitive running. Recently I have developed an achilles tendonitis. How should I treat this problem?

ANSWER: There are several problems that could be related to pain in the achilles tendon. With the number of different ailments that could be causing the pain, I recommend that you seek the advice of a qualified doctor in order to obtain the proper diagnosis.

There are, however, basically five different ailments that could be causing the pain in the achilles tendon area. First, is the possibility of a muscular strain. A strain involves the stretching or tearing of muscle or tendon fibers. This type of injury can be classified into three degrees of severity, with the third being the most severe.

Secondly, the pain may be the result of a contusion, inflammation or infection called tenosynovitis. A cause of tenosynovitis, and perhaps the most common when dealing with the ankle, is overuse or improper running biomechanics. The pain is caused by irritation between the tendon and the tendon sheath which results in a loss of the smooth sliding pattern between them.

Thirdly, tendonitis, the inflammation of the tendon, is another possible cause for your pain. As with tenosynovitis, tendonitis usually results from overuse or improper running biomechanics.

A fourth possible cause is calcaneal bursitis. This is an inflammation of the bursa which lies between the achilles tendon and the calcaneus (heel bone). The purpose of a bursa is to facilitate easy movement between layers of the body; when the bursa is inflammed, this movement is decreased and painful. Calcaneal bursitis is caused by repetitive trauma or tissue friction to the area of pain.

Finally, the pain may also be the result of an avulsion fracture. This occurs when the distal attachment of the achilles tendon actually pulls away from its attachment carrying with it a small piece of bone.

Treatment of these problems vary greatly, ranging from simple rest to surgical intervention. Therefore, no one can give you one simple treatment to cure all possible ailments.

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However; in the acute stages of true tendonitis, I would suggest the following treatments. Use either an ice bag or an ice bath for 15-20 minutes or an ice massage for 7-10 minutes. All of these types of treatments should be carried out 3-4 times a day for 3-7 days.

One of the most important treatments in the ailments mentioned is rest. You should be ready to include rest in your treatment regime. I also suggest that you maintain your cardiovascular fitness by doing other body part exercises while recovering. A quarter of an inch felt orthopedic heel lift may facilitate your return to activity.

The best treatment for all of these conditions is the prevention of the injury. To help prevent injuries, the following steps should be taken: 1) proper warm-up 2) a good flexibility program 3) maintain a high level of conditioning 4) choose the proper running shoes 5) slow progression when increasing speed or distance. Don't let a minor problem become a major one by ignoring it. Seek the advice of a physician early in order to ensure the proper diagnosis and treatment. The longer the problem goes untreated the longer it takes to recover.

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REFERENCES

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Illustrated Stedmans Medical Dictionary, 24th edition, Williams & Wilking, 1982.